

## 24. Stephen Was Stoned to Death

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children clearly understand how to explain to others the choices that they face in their lives. Stephen showed the religious leaders that throughout their history most of the Jews had been in rebellion against God. He showed the religious leaders that they must now choose whether to continue to rebel against God or to come to the One that God had provided to pay for their sin. In our topic today, we will see that the religious leaders made the choice that day to reject Christ and stoned Stephen to death.

After showing the religious leaders the pattern of rebellion that had been shown by most of the Jews, Stephen said in Acts 7:51-53, “*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.*” Stephen knew that he was speaking to the men that had condemned Christ to death. As a result, he now pointed out their spiritual condition.

The word translated “stiff-necked” means *stubborn or obstinate*. God had used this word to describe Israel in the wilderness. God told Moses in Exodus 32:8-9, ““They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!”” And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!’” Stephen now used this same word for the religious leaders that had condemned Christ. Stephen also said that they were uncircumcised in their heart and ears. Although the religious leaders were physically circumcised, in their hearts and with their ears they were rejecting God and His Word and were separated from God.

Stephen went on to say that just like their fathers in the Old Testament these religious leaders were resisting the Holy Spirit. He said that their fathers had persecuted the Old Testament prophets who had spoken of the fact that the Just One would come. Then, Stephen identified the Just One as Christ, the One that these very religious leaders had betrayed and murdered. As they stood before Pilate and condemned Christ, these very religious leaders had said in Matthew 27:25, “And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood *be* on us and on our children.’” Stephen showed here that the religious leaders were guilty of blasphemy against God and not just blasphemy against the temple.

Then, Stephen reminded them that Moses had given them the law more than 1400 years earlier through angels. Galatians 3:19 tells us that the angels were involved in the giving of the law since that verse says, “What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.” However, the Jewish religious leaders had not kept that law. The word translated “kept” means *to guard or observe*. Here, we see that Stephen now tells the Jewish religious leaders that they are the ones who are guilty of blaspheming the law because they have not kept the law.

We see the response of the Jewish religious leaders in Acts 7:54-56 which says, “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” The word translated “cut” means *to cut with a saw or to divide into two with a saw*. The only other place that this word is used in the New Testament is in Acts 5:33 where the apostles were speaking to these same religious leaders. That verse says, “When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.” In this verse, it is translated “furious.”

The fact that the religious leaders were cut to the heart in both passages shows that the Holy Spirit was convicting them of their sin of condemning Christ to death. Since this is the second time that this had happened, this left these religious leaders with only two choices. They could either repent or rebel. They chose to rebel. In fact, they were so angry that they ground their teeth together in anger. At the same time that these religious leaders were filled with anger, Stephen was filled with peace.

Stephen was also filled with the Holy Spirit. He was so full of peace that he was able to gaze right into heaven and see the glory of God. The word translated “gaze” means *to fix your eyes on something*. This same word was used to describe the disciples in Acts 1:10-11 where we read, “And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.’” The disciples gazed toward the heavens as they watched Christ taken up from the earth. Here, we see that Stephen had the opportunity to gaze right into heaven.

As Stephen gazed into heaven he said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Normally, we are told that Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. An illustration is Colossians 3:1 which says, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.” Here, we see that Christ is standing at the right hand of God. People stand to show great respect to others. Here, we see that Christ is standing to show His great respect for Stephen because He spoke so boldly to the men who had condemned Christ to death. Christ was preparing to welcome Stephen to his eternal home in heaven.

In contrast to the peace and joy that Stephen felt as He saw Christ and the glory of God, the Jewish religious leaders could no longer control their anger. Acts 7:57-60 says, “Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” The word translated “they cried out” is used most commonly in Acts when people are crying out in anger against the Christians. They also stopped their ears so that they would not hear anything else that Stephen said.

Suddenly, their anger caused them all to begin to run toward Stephen. They dragged him out of the city and began throwing stones at him in order to kill him. Leviticus 24:16 says, ““And whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name of *the Lord*, he shall be put to death.”” However, this was not the innocent stoning the guilty. Instead, this was the guilty stoning the innocent.

Meanwhile, we are also introduced to Saul as the one who held the coats while the others stoned Stephen. The fact that he held the coats is an indication Saul was deeply involved in the murder of Stephen. That is why Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:12-13, ““And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting *me* into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief.”” Here, we see that at least one of the men involved in the murder of Stephen later had a great ministry for Christ. Christ is certainly able to transform any life.

As Stephen was being stoned, Stephen prayed and said, ““Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”” We see that Stephen still had great peace even as he was being stoned. However, Saul could not enjoy a similar peace. His anger and hatred caused him to try and prove that Christ cannot give such peace. Acts 8:3 says, ““As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison.”” We see that Saul definitely became the leader of the opposition and persecution of the followers of Christ.

We also see that Stephen made one more statement before his death. Stephen knelt down on the ground. Then, he cried with a loud voice, ““Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”” Here, we see that the last thing that Stephen did before he entered the presence of the Lord was to pray for those who were stoning him to death. He followed the example that Christ had given as He was hanging on the cross. Luke 23:34 says, ““Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’ And they divided His garments and cast lots.”” Just as Christ asked the Father to forgive those who put Him to death, Stephen also asked the Lord to forgive those who were putting him to death. He showed the love of Christ at the very moment that he was dying. Then, we read that he fell asleep. This is a common way that the death of Christians is described.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to show the same kind of love to any who would persecute them or make them suffer for their faith in Christ. Such love is a powerful example of the power of Christ to change and transform our lives. We will only help our children to understand such love as they see us practice that kind of love in our own lives. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your children how to show the love of Christ in their daily lives.